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Photos by Tim Bath | Kokomo Tribune

STATE ISSUES: John Gregg makes time for conversation at the Tipton County Foundation during a fundraiser on Friday.



RUNNING: John Gregg is the only Democrat running for governor in 2016. He's pictured here at a fundraiser at the Tipton County Foundation on Friday.

Gregg on governing

Democratic candidate talks about some of the state's issues

By Josh Sigler and Rob Burgess
Kokomo Tribune

John Gregg has had three years to think about his narrow loss to Gov. Mike Pence in the 2012 Indiana gubernatorial race.

Gregg and running partner Vi Simpson lost to Pence and Sue Ellspermann by roughly 80,000 votes, or 3.5 percent of the electorate.

The race for 2016 hasn't heated to a fever pitch just yet, but Gregg's political gears are fully greased and turning as he prepares for redemption in 2016.

Gregg sat down with the Tribune Friday to discuss likely hot-button issues for Hoosiers heading to the polls next year.

Running unopposed

At this point, Gregg is the only Democrat in the race for governor. State Sen. Karen Tallian and state schools Superintendent Glenda Ritz both announced last month they were dropping out of the race, and former U.S. Sen. Evan Bayh aide Tom Sugar said Monday he wasn't running.

Obviously Gregg prefers the favorable situation, but not because he doesn't welcome competition. He said the party needs to minimize internal conflict as it tries to gain momentum for the 2016 election.

"Karen Tallian and I, and Glenda Ritz and I, all got along great before," Gregg said. "We were friends before. They've all endorsed me. And I've endorsed Glenda. And Glenda and I have made a lot of appearances together. We're working together on education issues. I made it clear on the deal with Glenda, I told people from a policy standpoint, I said the day we get elected and get sworn in is the day the war on education stops."

Education

Ritz was elected state superintendent in 2012, defeating incumbent Tony Bennett.

She's clashed with Republican leaders on the State Board of Education ever since. In January, the state's House Education Committee voted to allow the state board to elect a chair as opposed to being led by default by the superintendent.

This relationship concerns Gregg.

"I think the way the governor's office and the state board has treated Superintendent Ritz is not very professional," he said. "She is an elected official. The office deserves respect first and foremost. So, I don't like to see

that because we're not making any progress. Glenda, to her credit, has tried to go forward and do some things, and has. And, actually for being in the center of people kind of bombing at her I think she's done a remarkable job."

Gregg is also concerned about Indiana's school voucher program, something he says he's "totally against."

He sees the program as taking money out of public schools, an issue that desperately needs addressed.

Charter schools, on the other hand, are here to stay. The problem Gregg sees is when charter school legislation was passed, there was accountability in the fact teachers at those schools had to be licensed. That's no longer the case.

"I think what we need to do is rather than continue down this road, we need to kind of take a breath, sit back and look, and really take a hard look and see what's working, and what's not," Gregg said. "And I think there's a lot of pride of ownership in a lot of this education reform. People were so heaven-bent on making this happen that they don't want to admit maybe it needs tweaked or it has problems with it."

Southern Indiana HIV outbreak

In the largest HIV outbreak in the state's history, the number infected – nearly all in Scott County – went over the 180-mark in late August after reaching the 175-mark in late July.

Officials report the outbreak has mainly been fueled by individuals sharing needles used to inject prescription painkillers.

Gregg finds Pence's initial hesitation to address the issue troublesome. Pence signed legislation in May which allowed the installation of a needle-exchange program, but by that time, the number of infected people already had reached 150.

"You know, that's asinine," Gregg said. "... I mean, we've got to realize there's a drug problem. And to say that we would not do a needle exchange, that's irresponsible. They're going to be using the drugs, and we might as well see to it that that's a great way to stop the HIV virus. His attitude on that is akin to people who don't want to talk about sex education because if we don't talk about it, then, you know, the kids won't be procreating. I mean, how do you think we all got here?"

Marijuana legalization

The issue of legalizing the medicinal use of marijuana is somewhat close to Gregg's heart.

He lost his father Donald about a year ago to cancer of the esophagus, an ailment which eventually metastasized into his brain.

The last year of Donald's life was spent in hospice care, where the agony of cancer severely limited his ability to enjoy his time left with loved ones.

Although it was not, marijuana should've been part of his father's pain treatment, should Donald have wanted it, Gregg said.

"If a doctor would have told me that's something you need to consider, why shouldn't we have?" Gregg asked. "I mean, my dad had lived 80-plus years, had 63 years of marriage to my mother, and his quality of life his last few weeks of life was not good. And there are some people with chronic illnesses that it helps. We've got a lot of young men coming back from overseas with PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder]. That's the crime. We send these young people over there to fight and make our world safer because of terrorism, and they come back with issues."

On the issue of decriminalization, Gregg vowed, if elected, his administration would study the penalties on the low end of the issue, like possession of small amounts.

"What I would want to stress to people is decriminalization does not mean legalization," he said. "Not everyone remembers that or realizes that. I would imagine if we went over to the Howard County Jail, we'd find ... the citizens of Howard County are paying their precious tax dollars to keep

some kid in there who had a joint or two. I realize that it's against the law, but the fact of the matter is, I want my law enforcement in Indiana to look at child abusers and rapists and murderers and people who do armed robbery in stores and homes."

RFRA

The most hot-button issue of all during the 2015 General Assembly, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, was signed in March.

Proponents of the bill said it was designed to keep local and state laws from "substantially burdening" the deeply-held religious principles of individuals, businesses or religious institutions.

Those against the bill felt it opened a Pandora's box for discrimination against minorities, especially the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered) community.

"This bill is not about discrimination, and if I thought it legalized discrimination in any way in Indiana, I would have vetoed it," Pence said at the time. "In fact, it does not even apply to disputes between private parties unless government action is involved. For more than 20 years, the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act has never undermined our nation's anti-discrimination laws, and it will not in Indiana."

Gregg doesn't see it that way. He feels the bill was a play to stir up the hardcore right-wing base, and it backfired. It painted the state in a negative light, something which could have economic repercussions for years to come.

"We will never know the dollar loss that that has cost, and is costing and will cost us," he said. "Because I know for a fact a person that books acts at one of Indiana's largest public universities, told me that he still has agents, when he's dealing with other booking agents, that want to make sure this thing is settled. And he said he'd had a couple groups - and he said these weren't headliners - but he said they had a couple groups that did not want to come to Indiana because we did not have an LGBT statute."

Both sides of the issue deserve to be heard, Gregg made that clear. But, he also said the First Amendment gives all the right and freedom to worship as they choose, and the extra legislation was unnecessary.

He explained that during his 12 years as speaker of the Indiana House of Representatives, social issues weren't something he was willing to deal with.

He maintains that stance today, saying the only social issue-related bill he wouldn't veto was adding protections for the LGBT community to a civil rights statute.

“The worst thing of it is, and this is the sole difference between Mike Pence and I, I want to be governor of everybody,” Gregg said. “I want to be governor of all the people of Indiana. And that means whether they look like me, whether they act like me, whether they worship like me or don’t even worship at all. I’m not running for governor of people that are chubby, 60-year-old, bald-headed guys. You know, you run for governor of all the people. You owe respect and dignity. I believe truly in equality. I don’t think Hoosiers like discrimination.”

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